

Study & Experience an Interview with Ralph Ellison

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STUDY & EXPERIENCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RALPH ELLISON

[STEP TO]: BOTH YOU AND WRIGHT STROVE TO READ, AND STROVE to write, but I think the situations were quite different. What we see sometimes is that people have the theory, an ancient one, of sons wanting to slay the fathers. . . .

[ELLISON]: Well, Wright and I were of different backgrounds, different ages, and from different regions. What united us was our mutual interest in ideas and the craft of fiction, not some fanciful notion of father and son. I've heard the metaphor used in justification of actions taken after the disruption of friendships between younger and older writers, and inevitably it is the younger who uses it in his own defense. I don't buy it because it misnames a complicated relationship.

[S]: What do you mean?

[E]: For one thing, I mean that writers as artists are sons of many fathers, or at least the sons of many writers' *styles*. This was true even of Dostoevsky and Henry James, and no matter what the personal relationship between two writers happens to be, unless the younger writer is a mere imitator his style will diverge from, and often negate in certain aspects, the style of his older friend. That's where the important conflict takes place and it's more or less inevitable and it only obscures matters when we drag in the father-son metaphor. Rather than a case of the son slaying the father, such rows are more like those instances wherein an unwedded mother gives her unwanted baby over for adoption. And then, after the child has been brought through the precarious period of infancy, toilet-training and whooping cough, she discovers that she has safely weathered the terrors of shame and uncertainty of her maternity and proceeds to demand the return of the child. In doing so she makes noble noises about the sacredness of motherhood and the imperiousness of the maternal instinct, and has nasty things to say about the manners,

This interview took place at Mr. Ellison's home in New York City on March 8, 1976. The interviewers were Robert B. Stepto and Michael S. Harper.

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morals, and low human quality of those into whose hands she has thrust her squirming infant. Neither metaphor is really adequate, but sometimes a young writer seeks to place his infant talent in the care of an older writer whom he hopes will nurture, instruct and protect it and himself against the uncertainties that are a necessary phase of his development. But then, after he has gained confidence and achieved a sense of his own identity as a writer, he seeks to reclaim his psychological independence. Thus it seems to me that instead of seeking for a father principle, the writer, as *writer*, is seeking ways to give birth to books. And what if during his formative period a male writer is given support by a writer who is female? When he asserts values that are in conflict with hers shall we say that the son must slay the mother and thus brand him a "Mother"? Or if both writers are women do we say that the younger mother of books is slaying another mother? Seriously, a writer learns (and quite early, if he's lucky) to depend upon the authority of his own experience and intuition. He must learn to dominate them, but these are his capital and his guide, his compass and crud-detector, his sword and his cross; and he defers to the authority of others at the peril of his artistic individuality. His drive is to achieve his own artistic possibilities by whatever artistic means necessary. Of course a young writer may have feelings of dependency that have their source in areas of his personality that are not necessarily linked to his drive toward expression and would be present even if he were without artistic talent. But in the writer, in the artist, such feelings of dependency find relief in the act of creation.

[s]: So how do you view the relationship between a younger and older writer where one is established and the other just beginning.

[E]: If we stick to the father-son metaphor I'd say that, given a reasonable degree of psychological independence on the part of the younger man, it would be difficult to decide who at any given moment is in the position of "father," who of "son." Such relationships are dramatic; it is a matter of give and take. Insight is determined less by chronological age than by the density of one's felt experience and by one's consciousness of implication. A younger man whose adolescence was spent in a big city might well possess insights of which an older man whose formative period was spent in a small town may be innocent. I speak of possibilities, and of course the reverse is often true, with the small town providing experiences and insights difficult to come by in densely structured cities. Anyway, I would think that when a younger man designates an older writer as his symbolic father he would keep his projection subjective, miming it rather than giving it utterance.

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Because to name his attitude would be to concede far more to another than most assertive young men (and writers are very assertive types, at least psychologically) would wish to admit. What Kenneth Burke terms “courtship” is implicit in friendship, which is a relationship between, shall we say, two consenting adults who “woo” one another. In such relationships there are risks for both participants. For while the older writer might consider it flattering to be elected the “father” of a gifted symbolic “son,” there is also the possibility that he might be repelled by the responsibility of that role. Remember that both Hawthorne and Henry James regarded the imposition of one’s will upon the freedom of another as a sin against democratic individuality and gave considerable attention to the theme in their fiction. The lessons of his own experience, his own apprenticeship, might lead the older writer to feel that his young friend should undergo the risks that are part of the task of achieving an artistic identity. These risks are a part of his extended initiation. And if he is in fact psychologically mature enough to act out the “father” role he will have learned that artists are self-creating types—or at least that they tend to *pretend* that they are—and thus in their efforts in this direction they’re apt to savage those into whose hands they’ve delivered themselves. Then there is a wavery line between the pieties of friendship and the subjective compulsion which writers feel to project their individual visions. Each writer interprets life as he sees it, and in the conflict of passion and insight which occurs when writers strive to project their individual visions the son-slaying-the-father metaphor becomes a source of needless confusion. Writers of different backgrounds and generations often disagree because they seek to make unique works of art out of the subjectivity of diverse experiences which are connected objectively by duration and by issues arising from within the social scene in which they find themselves. If friendships between writers are not strong enough to overcome these built-in sources of conflict and competition, they fail, but if the relationship has been fruitful it finds continuity in the works of art that came into being during the quiet moments of antagonistic cooperation which marked the relationship.

[S]: Still the father/son metaphor persists . . .

[E]: Yes, but let’s not forget that often it isn’t the self-justifying younger writer who drags it in, it is done by outsiders; this, perhaps, because it seems to simplify the relationship between an older and younger artist. It allows for a facile sense of continuity between the generations of artists and does away with the mystery surrounding the nature of artistic influence. This is especially true of those who look at culture in strictly racial terms; people, let us say, who don’t know what to make of Richard Wright’s early apprentice relationship

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with James T. Farrell. Here I'm reminded of an incident that occurred back when I still thought of myself as a musician.

Shortly after arriving in New York from Tuskegee I wrote one of my teachers, that among other exciting developments, I had made the acquaintance of a famous artist. In return I received an enthusiastic letter in which my teacher said in effect, "Isn't it wonderful to be sitting at the feet of such an artist and to have the privilege of breathing in the intellectual atmosphere which he exudes." Oh, Lord! My reaction was to hit the ceiling. I wasn't particularly overt in my youthful arrogance, but my teacher's well-meaning interpretation of that relationship outraged me. For while I realized that the man had much to teach me about art (far more, in fact, than most of the older writers whom I found incapable of discussing writing techniques with any precision) I also realized that he was far from being an intellectual. Not only was he innocent of a serious interest in ideas, but he hadn't *begun* to read the books that I had read, even before entering college.

And yet in the romantic imagination of my delighted teacher this man had been cast in the role of my intellectual "father"—simply because he had achieved a fairly broad reputation and was some years my senior. So given such misinterpretations the objective complexity of such relationships can get lost and can happen whether the younger individual is *looking* for a "father" or not.

But then again, most friendships have their vague areas of mystery and the older member of a relationship between writers might himself project the younger in a role which obscures the extent of his intellectual maturity or the extent and variety of his experience. One of my early experiences with Dick Wright involved such an underestimation, with him assuming that I hadn't read many books with which I was, in fact, quite familiar.

[s]: What sorts of things did he assume you hadn't read?

[E]: Well, among others, he assumed that I hadn't read any of Marx . . . Conrad . . . Dostoevsky . . . Hemingway—and so on. I was somewhat chagrined by his apparent condescension, but instead of casting him in the role of misunderstanding "father," I swallowed my pride and told myself, "Forget it, you know what you know; so now learn what he thinks of in terms of his Marxism and the insights he's gained as a developed writer of fiction." And that was the way it went. At the time he was already working on *Native Son* and possessed a conscious world-view, while I had only begun to write, had no consciously formulated philosophy or way of structuring what I had read and experienced. So I listened and learned even when I disagreed. Speaking of fathers: I lost my own at the age of three, lost a step-father when I was about ten, and had another at the time I met

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Wright. I was quite touchy about those who'd inherited my father's position as head of my family and I had no desire, or need, to cast Wright or anyone else, even symbolically, in such a role.

However, his underestimation did make for a certain irony in our relationship; because sometimes, thanks to my own reading and quite different experience, I was in a position to have made suggestions for solving problems from which he might have benefited. But since I recognized that his subjective image of me did not encourage the acceptance of certain levels of advice I usually kept my opinions to myself.

[s]: To what extent does Wright's essay, "Blueprint for Negro Literature," represent his thinking when you were seeing him in New York in the late thirties and early forties?

[E]: That essay was written rather early. Wright had come to New York in June, 1937 and I met him the day after. He was preparing it for the first issue of *New Challenge*, of which he was an editor. Yes, I think it was a projection of his current thinking. It was polemical in relationship to the current line of the Communist Party, and his emphasis on nationalism, on how to deal with "Negro nationalism" (or "black chauvinism" as it was termed) was influenced by Joseph Stalin's pamphlet on the *National Question*. Wright was attempting to square the official communist "line" with certain resentments entertained by black communists as a result of their experience of American racism, some of which they found within the party. And as a writer he was struggling to work out an orientation for himself as one whose background lay in certain areas of Afro-American culture.

[s]: One thing that has troubled me about that essay, and I wonder if it troubled you, is the extent to which "folk materials" fall under the rubric of nationalism for him. That seems to me to be a rather limiting term for our various cultural traditions.

[E]: Actually, he was trying to work within the definitions of the Communist Party, which viewed Afro-Americans officially as a "nation" with geographical roots in the Black Belt of the South; a line which led some critics to hold that ultimately the white communists planned to segregate the blacks by herding them into the South and isolating them. I think that Wright was actually trying to deal with the confusion between race and culture within the limitations of communist theory. He held that "nationalism" was not the "black chauvinism" for which it was taken by white communists, and defined it as an "emotional expression of group feeling." However, I can't be too certain, since it's been years since I was familiar with the essay. I do know that Wright's attitude toward our Afro-American background was mixed. As a communist intellectual he appeared to consider Afro-American culture "naive" and "humble."

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But then, in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, he makes lyrical use of certain folk materials. It isn't an easy question because at the time Wright was so embattled; fighting the official line of the Communist Party, defending himself against the anti-intellectual attacks of certain black communist leaders, attacking in turn those writers and intellectuals whom he considered "bourgeois Negroes." On a more objective level, however, his *Blueprint* was a projection of his own plan for action and, I would suggest, a manifesto through which he was announcing his authoritative assumption of literary and intellectual leadership. He was utterly serious in this independent assertion of leadership, but just as serious in his effort to maintain party discipline while remaining loyal to his racial experience.

Perhaps the last was why he was so embattled with those he considered Bourgeois Negroes. He had little tact in dealing with them and I don't think that he was aware that his failure to communicate was often his own fault. He told me of an incident in which he went to a party at one of the colleges near Chicago where he was outraged to see that the black students were attired in tuxedos and evening dresses. As far as Wright was concerned, this alone marked them as "bourgeois" and I'm sure that his attitude made for the poor communication which resulted. His sartorial distrust of the group was reinforced by his communist ideology. However, Bill Attaway, the novelist, was present and although Attaway was not the intellectual that Wright was, he was certainly close to our Afro-American folk tradition—perhaps even closer than Wright—and a rather marvelous teller of folk tales and a serious writer in his own right. I suppose it was a matter of Wright's having seen the clothing and missed the people, a matter of an ideology-grounded, "trained-incapacity" to respect or communicate with Negroes who were formally educated. Perhaps it is one of the purposes of ideology to render it unnecessary to deal with human complexity. At any rate, you've raised questions that require scholarly investigation. In his essay on T. E. Lawrence, Malraux has stated that in revolutionary histories what runs counter to revolutionary convention (here let us say "ideology") is suppressed more imperiously than embarrassing episodes in private memoirs. I've always been struck by the fact that in the account which Wright gives in *Black Boy* of his running away from Mississippi he fails to reveal that the boys who helped him steal the canned goods and other articles with which he made his escape were, in fact, Zack and Wilson Hubert, the sons of the late President Hubert of Jackson College. This was a rather interesting detail to omit, I thought, from the account of one who was usually so sensitive to the class divisions within the Afro-American group. I happened to have known Zack and Wilson at the time their father was president of Langston University out in Oklahoma and found them rather lively and attractive young men. But

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perhaps it was a matter of conscious selectivity, of Wright's keeping his class views neat by filtering out certain contradictions that might have embarrassed his ideologically structured projection of experience. Perhaps their having been, or become, in his estimation "middle class" was inconvenient to the larger point he was making.

[S]: I guess one reason I have been thinking more and more about Wright is because we seem to be in a period of renewed interest in him. Why do you think this is so? Is this merely something cyclical, or is it something akin to the temper of the times?

[E]: Basically it's because he was a powerful writer and even though many of the solutions he offered were obviously inadequate, the issues which he explored haven't gone away. But I think much of it was stirred up by the Black Aesthetic people, who are *badly* in need of a hero, and an answer to James Baldwin's criticism of Wright. Now with Wright safely out of the way they can shape him and his work to their own convenience. Some of them would make him an outright cultural racist by way of giving authority to their own biases and confusions. But I think there is another reason: By now several generations of young people have been taught *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in high schools and colleges. After all, given a decade of emphasis upon "blackness" and "militancy" how many writers of Wright's stature are there to conjure with? It doesn't matter to the "Black Aesthetic" crowd that in tailoring him to suit their own threadbare arguments they are forced to overlook the fact that he was more concerned—at least during the period when his most powerful books were written—with Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology than with even his own version of "black nationalism." He wasn't, as they say, in their "bag" at all; yet that's where they've sought to cram him, no matter that his head and limbs refuse to accommodate their efforts.

It would seem that these black "Black Aestheticians" are so hung up on race and color that they tend to imitate that species of worm which maintains its ranks by following a scent laid down by the leader. Introduce them to the rim of a swill barrel, let the leader negotiate one circle of the rim and even though you remove him the rest will continue to circle the swill indefinitely! It doesn't matter that the leader might have been taken off and gone on to become metamorphosed into a butterfly and flown away, they keep on circling. Frequently it appears that somebody or some thing has staked off a certain area of thought and endeavor and said, "Here, this is yours; this is where you're to stay and we've marked it "Black" so that you can be safe and comfortable. Therefore you stay right there and everything will be O.K.—You hear?" And oh, how so many Afro-American would-be intellectuals agree! They can't seem to imagine that books or authors that fail to mention "Black" explicitly

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might be of crucial importance in dealing with their own racial, cultural, and individual dilemmas. Thus it's ironic to see these people embracing Wright, because his was anything but such an attitude. In his effort to make some sort of intellectual *Gestalt* for himself, he read all kinds of books, entertained all kinds of ideas. And during the days when I knew him well he certainly didn't allow racial considerations to limit the free play of his intellect. After all, most of his friends, like both of his wives, were white.

[S]: Well, you mention the Black Aesthetic crowd: On the one hand, we have their interest in Wright, yet on the other we have very little fiction produced by these writers, these writer-critics. Why, in your opinion, don't they write fiction? Is it because of conventional notions of the novel being a bourgeois art form, or is it because a novel is so damn hard to write (laughter).

[E]: I can tell you this: they're damn hard for me! As for the others, I have no idea. I don't know most of those people, even though many seem to feel that we have a personal quarrel. But to put it into the vernacular, I would think that there's a heap of shucking going on and none of it stacks. They find it easier to issue militant slogans while remaining safely in the straight-jacket of racist ideology—the ideology that has been made of what they call “Blackness”—than to deal with either the beautiful and confounding complexities of Afro-American culture or the difficulties that must be faced by those who would convert experience into the forms of the novel. If they can't grasp the meaning of what they live and read because their obsession with the mysticism of race and color has incapacitated their ability to see, then they certainly can't subject themselves to the discipline demanded by the novel. Which, after all, is a product of the *integrative* and *analytical* play of the imagination as it seeks to convert experience into forms of symbolic action. How can one abstract Afro-American experience from that of the larger culture of which it is so important a part without reducing it, in the name of “Blackness,” to as vapid a collection of stereotypes as those created in the name of whiteness? As I say, imagination itself is *integrative*, a matter of making symbolic wholes out of parts. Afro-American culture is itself a product of that process carried on under the most difficult social and political conditions. Thus it would seem to me that any objective approach to its dynamics would lead to the basic conclusion that, here in the U.S. at least, culture has successfully confounded all concepts of race. American culture would not exist without its Afro-American component, or if it did, it would be quite different. Yet, certain people who are fixed on the concept of race at the expense of culture would claim Alexander Dumas as a true blue “Boot,” “Race Man,” or what not, but this is to ignore his achievement, the language

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in which he thought and wrote, and the image which he held of himself. All this by way of elevating a part of his blood line to a position of total (really totalitarian) importance.

But not only was Dumas culturally a Frenchman, he was a Frenchman who worked and achieved himself in the novel, a literary form which in itself was influenced by developments taking place in England, in Germany and in Russia. Such people also claim Pushkin as their own, and not because of the fact that he was the father of modern Russian literature, but because there was an African or Ethiopian in his background. The relationship between biology and culture is mysterious; perhaps General Hannibal's sperm was precisely what was needed to release the greatness of Russian literature. But although he was a distinguished military man and engineer in his own right, we know of him mainly because of his great-grandson's *literary* achievements, not for his influence upon the Russian racial mixture. I suppose what I'm saying is that an over-emphasis on our own racial origins in Africa (an origin which is only partial) at the expense of the way in which our cultural expression has transcended race, our present social status and our previous condition of servitude, is to ignore much of what is most intriguing and admirable in Afro-American experience. Worse, it is to miss the fact that American culture owes much of its distinctiveness to idioms which achieved their initial formulation through the cultural creativity of Afro-Americans. White Americans have put tremendous energy into keeping the black American below the threshold of social mobility but they still had to descend to see what Negroes were making of the new democratic experience, in order to know what to make of their own. This was especially true of the vernacular idiom in the arts, where lessons were to be learned in everything from power to elegance.

[s]: So what are we to make of people who say, in echo of a certain black poet, that the black masses are uninterested in elegance?

[E]: To accept that notion you've got to have a tin ear and absolutely no eye for style. Elegance turns up in every aspect of Afro-American culture, from sermons to struts, pimp-walks and dance steps. Listen to a sermon by Howard Thurman or the Reverend Franklin, father of the famous singer. Listen to Jimmy Rushing sing the *How Long Blues*. Listen to Basie, listen to Ellington; watch O. J. Simpson slice through an opposing line with a dancer's slithering grace. And doesn't all that Afro-American adoration of the Cadillac speak of elegance? Look at the elegance with which the dedicated worshiper of the Cadillac sits at the steering wheel of his chariot. If Bill Robinson and Honi Coles weren't elegant tap dancers, I don't know the meaning of the term. And if Louis Armstrong's meditations on the "Potato Head Blues" aren't marked by elegance, then the term is too

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inelegant to name the fastidious refinement, the mastery of nuance, the tasteful domination of melody, rhythm, sounding brass and tinkling cymbal which marked his style. Aesthetically speaking, when form is blended successfully with function, elegance results. Black Americans expect elegance even from prizefighters and basketball players and much of the appeal of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis sprang from the fact that each was as elegant as the finest of ballet dancers.

Such statements are products of ideological foolishness and are efforts to palm off sloganeering doggerel as poetry. Surprisingly, the verse of some of these people gives the lie to their assertions, for it reveals as much of the influence of E. E. Cummings and Emily Dickinson as of Langston Hughes or Sterling Brown. Blacks alone didn't invent poetics any more than they invented the American language; and the necessary mixture of cultural influences that goes into creating an individual poetic style defies the neat over-simplifications of racist ideologies. Some of the "Black Aesthetic" people say that nothing written before 1967 is of any value, but I'm pretty sure that those who do would *not* say that nothing done in surgery or law before that date was valueless; but then such people don't chatter about law or surgery because they recognize that they are too difficult to be reduced to empty verbalizing. An unserious familiarity with literature breeds contempt, so they feel that they can get away with any kind of irresponsible statement. Perhaps they'd feel less secure if our people were as interested in literature as they are in music. The Kansas City physician who accidentally severed the jugular of band leader Benny Moten while performing a tonsillectomy was almost lynched by his own people in their outrage over the discovery that inept medical technique could end the life of a musician whom they revered for his musical excellence. I quote an extreme instance, but sometimes Afro-Americans have been known to call their own irresponsibles to account.

[s]: What did you think of the *Black World* issue on your work?

[E]: Hell, man, what would you expect? It was obvious that I couldn't have a fair exchange of opinion with those who used the issue to tee off on me, so there was nothing to do but treat them as I had bad dogs and bigoted whites down south: Mentally, I walked away from it. Long before that issue was published they had been banging away at a hateful straw man whom they'd labeled "Ellison" and were using it as a scapegoat for their discontents and disappointments, and it appeared that the more I refused to be provoked the more strident they became. I was amused by the time they wasted attacking me when it was really a couple of *books* that were making them mad, and the only way to win a fight with a book is to write a better book.

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I could have respected them had they done that but I saw little evidence that this was going to happen. However, I did appreciate the essays by those who used the issue to express serious disagreement with my work and my position on social issues. I hoped that younger writers would read them as antidotes to the rantings of those who tried to reduce literary discussion to the level of the dirty dozens. I was also amused by the extent of the bad-mouthing because the editor of *Black World* was so persistent in his attempt at scapegoating, while I continued to function very much as I had always done. Even having a bit of influence. His conception of the cultural reality of the U.S. was puzzling because he appeared to have no idea of how books can reach beyond the boundaries of the black community. He seemed to think that he could kill the influence of a novel by attacking its author. That struck me as strange, since his organ reached but a few thousand readers while my books were being read by *many* thousands.

Then there was the other contributor to the issue who gave the impression of being as eager to burn books as any Nazi *gaullier*—which was rather obscene, considering that the man is an old communist and has spent a good part of his life working in a library. His example and that of a like-minded fellow contributor demonstrated that they could be just as vehement, provincial, and totalitarian in the name of “Black Militancy” and “Black Aesthetics” as they had been in the name of “Soviet Communism” and “Socialist Realism.” I guess it’s a case of Reds infiltrating Blacks, running into a stubborn Negro and turning blue in the face. But I can say this for them: Safe behind the fence provided by a black capitalist, they had one big “barking-at-the-big-gate” go at me. They even managed to convince a few students that I was the worst disaster that had ever hit Afro-American writing. But for all their attacks I’m still here trying—while if I’m asked where is *Black World* today my answer is: Gone with the snows of yester-year/down the pissoir—Da-daa, Da-daaa—and good riddance!

[s]: Our talk about groups reminds me of something Leon Forrest once said. He was asked if he belonged to a group or crowd, and I believe his response was, “I guess you might say that McPherson, Toni Morrison, Albert Murray, Ralph Ellison and I might constitute a crowd.” Now what is your response to that?

[E]: It’s an interesting grouping of writers whom I respect; still I am by instinct (and experience) a loner. There is no question, however, but that we share what Malraux has termed a “collectivity of sensibilities” and a high regard for the artistic potential of Afro-American experience. And certainly we’re all more concerned with art than with ideology or propaganda. But as to our constituting a school, that kind of thing—no. I don’t think it desirable even though it offers some relief from the loneliness of the trade. For when writers associate too

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closely there is a tendency to control one another's ideas. I'm not implying that association is itself necessarily a negative matter, but I suspect that the loneliness of writing causes us to seek for a kind of certainty among our peers—when very often it's the *uncertainty* of the creative process which leads to new insights and to unanticipated formulation. Nevertheless, I share ideas and certain goals with such people as Forrest and McPherson, just as I do with a number of white writers, and certainly with Al Murray, whom I've known since our days at Tuskegee; but they do their own thinking and I do mine. (I don't know Miss Morrison personally.) Perhaps Forrest was really describing a collectivity of outsiders who are united by a common attitude toward the craft.

[S]: He is also describing a group of *fiction* writers, and I can't help but continue to link this issue to genre . . .

[E]: I agree, because a writer's point of view is determined to a large extent by the form in which he works. The form shapes his sensibility, it structures his emotions, and guides his imagination and vision. That's most important: The novel is a complex agency for the symbolic depiction of experience, and it demands that the writer be willing to look at both sides of characters and issues—at least while he's working. You might say that the form of the novel imposes its morality upon the novelist by demanding a complexity of vision and an openness to the variety and depth of experience.

Kenneth Burke says that language "moralizes" both mankind and nature, thus the novel "moralizes" the novelist. Dostoevsky could be pretty rabid in some of his ideological concerns, pretty bigoted in his attitudes toward the members of certain groups, but when he chose to depict characters identified with such groups he gave them all the human complexity that the form and action of the novel demanded. I don't think that you can do this if your mind is made up beforehand. You end up creating stereotypes, writing propaganda.

[HARPER]: Is there any sort of organization that you now see in the fiction you've published over the years since *Invisible Man*? I've put together the fiction I've seen in various places and it seems to me that it is all of one piece—that is, I see certain kinds of relationships. For example, could one go out and collect "Song of Innocence" and "Juneteenth" and make a case for works-in-progress being sections of the same novel?

[E]: Yes, they *are* parts of the same novel, but whether they will remain in that relationship I don't know, because, you know, I lost a good part of the novel in a fire. It's a long manuscript, and it just might be two books.

[H]: I remember talking with some students at Harvard and two of them were offended by "Juneteenth" where Hickman says that

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Africans were heathens who didn't have any souls. They said this is a terrible thing! You got to get him up here!

[E]: They went on to say other things, didn't they? Did they read what was *there*?

[H]: Yes, but they were bothered by "heathen." Again, this is the old question of ideology. I think the source of their agitation was that they thought you were making a statement to the effect that when Africans came to this country they were soulless.

[E]: Oh, for God's sake! I didn't make that statement, *Hickman* did. He was preaching about transcendence; about the recovery from fragmentation; about the slave's refusal, with the help of God, to be decimated by slavery. He was speaking as a Christian minister of the role his religion had played in providing a sense of unity and hope to a people that had been deliberately deprived of a functional continuity with their religions and traditions. Hickman didn't attend college but, hell, he knew that all of our African ancestors didn't belong to the same tribe, speak the same tongue, or worship the same gods . . .

[H]: If they had proposed the argument that either Bliss or Hickman was the persona of Ralph Ellison *that* might have been debatable—it probably wasn't *right*, but it might have been debatable. The one-dimensional character, the way they view literary creation, is what bothered me. We got in a similar row over "Song of Innocence." In the mind of some students who are not familiar with literary convention and the whole business of creation, anything you write is autobiographical, it's about you.

[S]: This reminds me of students who write papers for me about *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, and begin, "When Johnson gets off the train in Atlanta . . ." [Laughter]

[H]: Do you get many inquiries about the chapter deleted from *Invisible Man* that appears in *Soon, One Morning*? Did you willingly cut it out?

[E]: Well, the book was long and they wanted cuts, and I found a better way than just cutting was to restructure. So, instead of that particular handling of the narrative sequence I just took it out. I think it would have probably worked better in.

[H]: Why isn't "Society, Morality and the Novel" in *Shadow and Act*? It came before.

[E]: I wanted to put it in but my editor said no. I think it was because we already had enough material.

[S]: Can you tell us about your teaching experiences? I'm especially interested in experiences resulting from attempts to teach certain texts side by side. For example, in 1970, I once began a course on the

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Harlem Renaissance by assigning *The Great Gatsby*. I still think it was a great idea, but the students couldn't get with it—even on the level of establishing a milieu, or “counter-milieu.”

[E]: I have had the same trouble getting that across with *Gatsby*. For instance, I find it significant that the character who saw who was driving the “death car” was a Negro; and yet, some students resist when I tie that in with Tom Buchanan's concern over the rise of the colored races, the scene in which blacks are being driven by a white chauffeur, and the characterization of the Jewish gangster. They miss the broader context of the novel that is revealed in the understated themes of race, class, and social mobility. The novel is set in what was called the Jazz Age, but what is the difference between Fitzgerald's Jazz Age and that of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong? I point out that Fitzgerald was familiar with Brick Top's nightclub and was often at the Harlem Cotton Club, and I suggest that after reading what Fitzgerald made of the experience the student should take a look at what Langston Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance made of it. It's ironic that some of the white writers were more open to knowledge relating to the Harlem of that period than are the black kids who refuse to study it seriously because they feel that they know it through their genes. They think affirmations of “Blackness” resolves all mysteries of time and place, circumstance and personality. But for a writer like Fitzgerald Harlem was one of the places where the action was, so, being a good novelist, with an interest in people and an eye for exciting new developments in the culture, he went where the action was unfolding. Now we don't have to like what white writers, musicians, and dancers made of what went on, but I do think we should recognize that across the division of race they were attempting to absorb and project some of the cultural complexity of the total American scene. They were responding in their individual ways to the vitality of the Afro-American cultural idiom. The “Black Aesthetic” crowd buys the idea of total cultural separation between blacks and whites, suggesting that we've been left out of the mainstream. But when we examine American music and literature in terms of its themes, symbolism, rhythms, tonalities, idioms and images it is obvious that those rejected “Neegroes” have been a vital part of the mainstream and were from the beginning. Thus, if a student is to grasp the complex sources of American cultural tradition he should assume that a major part of that tradition springs from Afro-America; because one of the few ways the slaves and their descendants had of expressing their inner sense of identity was by imposing their own aesthetic will upon those who assumed that they would have nothing to do with defining American experience. Today sociologists, many of them the

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first members of immigrant families to attend college, and who now teach at universities and advise politicians, are telling us that the American melting-pot didn't melt. But despite discrimination and other inequities in the society, its various cultural idioms did, indeed, melt and are continuing to do so.

[H]: Don't you teach a course in the vernacular?

[E]: Yes, from a base in American lit. I teach a course which allows me to touch many areas of American culture. American literature grew out of the development of American vernacular speech as it asserted its modes against European tradition and proper English usage. As the young nation achieved coherence the very pressures of Nature, of the New World "scene," forced Americans to create a flood of new terminologies: for naming the newly created social forms, the nuances of the individualism that was spreading throughout the young society, and the relationships between diverse groups. Out of the democratic principles set down on paper in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights they were improvising themselves into a nation, scraping together a conscious culture out of the various dialects, idioms, lingos, and methodologies of America's diverse peoples and regions. In this effort the English language and traditional cultural forms served both as guides and as restraints, anchoring Americans in the wisdom and processes of the past, while making it difficult for them to perceive with any clarity the nuances of their new identity. Given the reality of slavery and the denial of social mobility to blacks, it is ironic that they were placed by that very circumstance in the position of having the greatest freedom to create specifically *American* cultural idioms. Thus the slaves had the unnoticed opportunity to be culturally daring and innovative because the strictures of "good taste" and "thou shall-nots" of tradition were not imposed upon them. And so, having no past in the art of Europe, they could use its elements and their inherited sense of style to improvise forms through which they could express their own unique sense of American experience. They did so in dance, in music, in cuisine and so on, and white American artists often found the slaves' improvisations a clue for their *own* improvisations. From the very beginnings of the nation Afro-Americans were contributing to the evolution of a specifically *American* culture.

[H]: Are you happy with your students at N.Y.U.?

[E]: With some of them; you know, the quality varies from class to class. I am unhappy with the numbers who can't write. I consider myself as having had a fairly incomplete education, but as I look back I realize that even in high school there were a number of us who could write rings around some of my graduate students. Most of my

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students are white. I haven't had many black students, but when I work with those who are having difficulty I say to them, "All right, you are here now, so recognize that you have certain disabilities which I can't ignore. So let's not kid ourselves but face the fact that there's some catching up to be done. There's nothing wrong with your mind but there *is* a lot wrong with the kind of training you've had, if not then with the kind of attention you've given to learning. Face that fact and allow your experience to feed your study and you'll be surprised at how fast you can come up to par." Fortunately, a few understand that this isn't a put-down, but the truth.

The other day I had to tell a black student who wants to substitute militancy for study and who came up with an easy criticism of George Washington Carver that I didn't like Dr. Carver either, but for a specific and personal reason: At Tuskegee he was always chasing me out of Rockefeller Hall where I'd go to work out my harmonic exercises on the piano. My investigations into the mysteries of harmony interfered with his investigations of the peanut, and to me harmony was more important. But today I realize that not only did a large industry draw upon his experiments but by manipulating strains of peanuts he was growing himself an American President! Dr. Carver has been called an "Uncle Tom," but I keep looking at the announcement of prizes given in such fields as science and architecture, in biology and electronics and I'm chagrined over the fact that few of our students are getting them. Sheer militancy isn't enough, and when used as an excuse to avoid study it is disastrous. Today we're in a better way to learn and participate in the intellectual life of this country than ever before, but apparently we're taking fewer advantages of our opportunities than when we were limited to carrying bags and waiting tables. The availability of ideas and culture means little if we don't take advantage, participate, and compete with the best in our elected fields.

[H]: Bob and I know a folklorist who thinks you are one of the few people who really understand what folklore is and how it ought to be used. Would you care to comment on that?

[E]: Folklore has been such a vital part of American literature that it is amazing that more people (and especially writers) aren't aware of it. Constance Rourke points out that there are folk motives even in the work of Henry James. I guess one of the difficulties here is that people think of folklore as "quaint," as something that is projected in dialect, when in fact it is its style and wisdom that count. The same problem arises when you speak of *American* folklore in the general sense and overlook the complex influence of vernacular idioms, the mixture of vernacular styles, that operate in American culture. Considering the social condition of the slaves, what is to be made of

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their singing a comic song which refers to a black girl's dancing "Taglioni" in the street? Or what are you going to do with fairly illiterate jazz musicians who interpolate phrases from the likes of Bach, Verdi, or Puccini in their improvisations on the Blues or popular melodies? In this country it is necessary to redefine what we mean by folklore, because, culturally, Americans are heirs to the culture of all the ages, and it is through the vernacular process that we blend folk and classical modes into an art that is uniquely American. Thus I believe it a mistake to think of the slaves as having been separate from the eclectic processes, the general culture, when in fact they were participating in it in many unexamined ways. Art was an inseparable part of their African forebearers' lives, and they did, after all, do most of the building of Monticello! They made the bricks and did the carpentry and cabinetry. Recently *The Crisis* published an article calling attention to the manner in which historians tend to omit the slave craftsmen when describing the "cultural activities" of Thomas Jefferson, but my God, somebody was there doing the work and receiving the instructions necessary for carrying it to completion. If there are doubts as to this, all one has to do is observe the demonstrations down at Colonial Williamsburg. Slaves were craftsmen and artists as well as field hands and as such they absorbed and mastered the styles and techniques around them. That's how I see it and I can't imagine a human situation that would *not* be like that.

Perhaps we have too damn much of a wound-worshiping investment in the notion that the slaves were brutalized beyond the point of exercising their human will to survive. Which reminds me of an aspect of the uproar centering around *Time on the Cross*. Whatever the viability of their methods, the authors were saying that slavery wasn't as brutalizing as the usual view would have it. They held that the slaves were *not* reduced to a gas-oven state of docility, a view that would see each and every slave master as a Hitler and American slavery as a preview of the Holocaust. I'm no historian, but their view seems to offer a more adequate accounting for the character of the ex-slaves whom I knew in Oklahoma and Alabama. After all, I did see my granddaddy and he was no beaten-down "Sambo." Rather he was a courageous, ingenious old guy who owned property, engaged in the Reconstruction politics of South Carolina, and who stood up to a mob after they had lynched his best friend. When ordered to leave town, he told the lynchers, "If you're gonna kill me, you're gonna kill me here where I've got my family, and my property and my friends." He died there years later, in his own bed, and at the age of 76. I also knew one of his friends who, after years of operating a printing business for a white man, came north and set up his own printing shop in Harlem.

The other argument that I find interesting in *Time on the Cross*

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is the authors' statement that, while the slaves in the Caribbean and Brazil died off every ten years and had to be replaced from Africa, those in the United States managed to reproduce themselves. And of course they did! There were times when native-born blacks outnumbered native-born whites. Unlike the slaves of the other Americas, they had a good injection of white European chromosomes which made them immune to many European diseases. (Laughter!) They also became "Indianized," and certainly these biological facts show in our faces. Still, many historians and sociologists act as though these factors are irrelevant, and by ignoring them they contribute to the divisive mystification of race.

[S]: I pointed that out to an historian the other day, and I could tell by the look on his face that I was embarrassing him! (Laughter)

[E]: Then Fern Brodie published a biographical account of Jefferson's long affair with his black mistress. Why don't the historians allow these people their human complexity?

[H]: Well, we did!

[E]: That's right! (Laughter) It's amusing the way this thing works. In my class I get raised eyebrows by pointing out that race is always at the center of our uneasy preoccupation with American identity. It is as abiding as our concern with the principles of freedom and equality. Thus, when you read American literature and fail to see the words "Black" or "Negro" or "Afro-American" in a given work, it doesn't mean that they are not operating there symbolically. The old phrase "There's a nigger in the woodpile" was more fact than fantasy. Just examine the logic of a work's symbolism and you'll discover that there are surrogates for Blacks and the hierarchal motives they symbolize; just as Negroes are often surrogates for the American Indian. Once we were discussing the tragedy of the Indian, and someone said, "Yeah, the Indian, he stood up to the white man; he didn't take that crap." This went on until someone got serious and said, "Yeah, but look here man, what *happened* to them damn Indians?" And I said, "Well, don't you know? *You* became the damn Indians!" They laughed but I don't think that it really got across. As a child watching cowboy and Indian movies I frequently pulled for the Indians to win, but as you know, they seldom did.

[H]: What would you like to see people researching and writing that would begin to correct things?

[E]: Well, I would really like to see more studies that deal with the actual pre-Emancipation scene; works that would place people. Who was doing what jobs? And what happened to them after Emancipation, and later after the betrayal of Reconstruction? Where did people go? I'd like to see more done on the role of geography in American Negro history. Many black cowboys were slaves who, after their

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owners moved west, were taken out of the cotton patch and put on horses. Many Afro-American characteristics that are assumed to spring from the brutality of slavery are partially the results of geography, of the localities in which they were enslaved. Some of this is suggested by the phrase "sold down the river." The Mississippi was as tremendous a force in Afro-American history as it was in the vision of Mark Twain. The geographical division of the country into political districts and regions with complementary agricultural and economic systems underlies much of Afro-American poetic symbolism. That the star points north is not important because of some abstract, mystical or religious conception, but because it brought into conjunction Biblical references, concrete social conditions and the human will to survive—including the fact that if you got safely across certain socio-geographical boundaries you were in freedom. Writers have made much of the North Star but they forget that a hell of a lot of slaves were running away to the West, "going to the nation, going to the territory," because as Mark Twain knew, that too was an area of Negro freedom. When people get to telling stories based on their cooperate experience, quite naturally such patterns turn up. Because as significant scenes in which human will is asserted, they help organize and focus narrative. They become more poetic the further we are removed from the actual experience, and their symbolic force is extended through repetition.

I'd also like to see someone write about jazz in such a way that they cover those people who are the intermediaries, the mentors, the teachers, the transmitters of classical tradition. All around the country there were musicians, bandmasters, etc. who disapproved of the jazz life but who, nevertheless, were training people to read music and to perform on instruments. People who taught voice and staged operettas, and so on. You still have them in the colleges, you have them in the towns, giving piano lessons, teaching harmony. These are the links between the classical and folk traditions and jazz.

[H]: Thanks for letting us visit with you this afternoon.

[E]: It's been my pleasure. I enjoyed it.